

The Ohio State University  
Commencement Address  
by  
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I want you to know that I know the highest value at commencement, and that is brevity. I want to make two points and tell a story, but to make the points, I need to identify with you. I'm also looking for a job. And so, if I see you out on the recruitment circuit, wave to me.

I want to introduce my two points by telling you briefly a little more who I am. I came out of a town of 800; Colorado rancher, farmer, raised sheep... Went to an agriculture college because I knew how to square dance, but not the other kind. I became a lawyer. I served in the Air Force. I became a pilot. I owned and operated a ski area. I ran John Deere stores. I had trouble keeping a job, if you think about it.

But I began to view political life and the legislature, state treasurer, governor, and then at age 71, I took on the challenge of learning how to be a school superintendent. All that means that my first point is the following – we have got to be life-long learners.

If there's one thing I can share with you as you reach this transitional point, we all are living in a world that's much too complex and changing too fast to ever think that we have sufficient skill, knowledge, or understanding to do our job. Every day I served for 6 1/2 years in that school district, I knew I had to dig deeper and deeper and deeper, or I could not do my job.

My first point is: we need to find a strategy to be life-long learners. It doesn't come easy. Many expect you to have every answer, and you've got to be frank about it and say, there are things I don't know. And you've got to ask questions and dig and inquire constantly.

Now, I did that when I went to run this district. I kept asking the question, why did we do this, how long have we done this, is this an effective thing to do? And sometimes, it was embarrassing, but it is a way in which we all, I think, need to approach our work as life-long learning.

Before I leave this point, I want to say also, you need to model it. When I came there -- because Los Angeles is a very large place -- I was assigned a bus driver to drive my car, and he was a wonderful human being, Emanuel. And we made a deal. I said, "Manuel, you can drive for me, but you have to go to college." He was a high school graduate. So we made a deal, because I had very long days, and he began six years ago. He's now in his third year in the California State University system. Very good student, 3.5 grade average. But he is just an example of a colleague that I spent most of my days with, and we did that life-long learning together. So that's my first point.

The second point is related; is more philosophical. And if there's one truth that I acquired in this life I have lived, it's the following: that one's view of the truth is always partial. I got that from two scholars, Martin Buber and Richard Neber.

Let me explain this. I have a personal history. I'm white, I'm rural, I'm middle-class, I'm male, I'm heterosexual. I have all these characteristics, and I'm going to look at the world different than someone who is from Cuba, who is black, who is homosexual, who is an agnostic and a Communist. Now, it doesn't mean that our views are necessarily going to be better one than the other, but we come with a personal history, and we view the world out of that personal history.

It's tremendously important for us in America today to think hard about that because of the power of this nation. Education affects our ability to understand what truth is, and we constantly seek it, but we need to know that those who differ from us have some portion of the truth that we do not yet understand. And I particularly lay this on the table when we are dealing with a Muslim world, which very directly relates to our ability to live in peace and to have the life that we want to have. And we as a nation and as individuals have need to stop and think about [how] other people see the world through a different set of rose-colored glasses, shaped by their own personal history. It's tremendously important that we think about this in terms of our policy as a nation and the way in which we conduct ourselves politically throughout the world.

Now, let me say this is not easy, because all of us, however we make decisions, have got to say, this is the truth we see now, and you have to act on it, and you have to be bold and sometimes aggressive with it. But you constantly need to be looking for mid-course correction, for that piece that you did not see. And I just want to share that as a second point of reflection, because I, as you well know, have been very active politically and am still active politically. And one of the things I fear the worst are those who claim absolute truth. As I have read history, whether it was the Inquisition, the Crusades, the Third Reich, most of the evil I have seen accumulated historically is by those who felt their view of the truth was absolute.

I live in a political climate in my own country in which that is also still very present. And we've got to deal with that. This world is getting very much smaller. We're at much greater risk. And just as we are talking about being continual learners and continuing our own skill set, we need to think about how important it is that we constantly seek to stand in the shoes of others, try to see the world through their eyes. It doesn't necessarily mean we have to agree with their position, but we need to be aware of that tension and that view that our truth is limited, not absolute.

Those are my two points.

I want to close with a story. It's about Mother Teresa. When I was Governor of Colorado, Mother Teresa and four nuns flew in one day on a private jet to spend the day with me and a couple of others on housing. What could they learn from Denver and Colorado that would relate to India and the housing challenge. I went with the Catholic Archbishop in an old Chevy Suburban -- it was new then, but it was old, as I think of it now. It was about 15 years old. And I don't know if you remember those cars, but they had very narrow seats, the third seat. And you had to climb over the middle seat kind of to get there.

And so when we arrived, this plane, small jet unloaded, and here was Mother Teresa and four nuns. I looked at the suburban, at the Archbishop in full robe, and I said, "Wow, I've got to get in that first and I've got to get way in the back." So I climbed in, climbed over the middle seat and crawled in to make the room for others. The second person in the Suburban was the Archbishop. He pulled up his robe, climbed over the middle seat, got up there with me. The third person to enter the car was Mother Teresa, and what

did she do? She got in, pulled up her skirt a bit, climbed over the middle seat, squeezed in between the Archbishop and me in the back seat and looked up at me with a great big smile and said, "Isn't it great that God made me so small?" And I tell you this story because it's a very fun and human story, but I also tell you that because I want to conclude by how you and I and all of us deal with our ego.

We need it. If you're going to go do what you were born to do and educated to do, you're going to have to be bold. You're going to have to be courageous. You're going to have to be aggressive, and you've got to believe in yourself to do that. But having spent 40 years in politics, I can tell you the Achilles heel of most leaders I know is the arrogance of ego. We need to learn to deal with that.

My final paragraph -- when I left L.A. in the last two or three weeks, I got a lot of comments about what I had done or had not done in the time I spent there, but there is one that rings in my ear. And it was a very respected gentleman that I knew who said very quietly to me, "Thank you for what you've done. It was never about you. It was about them." I've thought about that. I don't know if I deserve the comment, but I want to earn that comment. It wasn't about how well I had done the job. It wasn't any measurement of what I had done. It was what my focus was. It was about them, not me. But I just want to say in conclusion about your work, whatever it may be, be a life-long learner. Remember that your view of the truth is limited, but always have the work be about them, not you.

Thank you very much.